

Former French prime minister under investigation over COVID-19 response

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Former French Prime Minister Édouard Philippe was heard on October 18 by the Court of Justice of the Republic (CJR), which judges crimes committed by French government ministers in office. After the indictment of his former health minister, Agnès Buzyn, on September 10, 2021, on charges of mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic, Philippe was made an “assisted witness” but was not indicted.

The CJR’s decision confirms that there is significant evidence that the Philippe government’s pandemic response involved state criminality. In French law, an “assisted witness” is a person implicated in a criminal case against whom there is evidence to suggest guilt in the offence. Philippe is an assisted witness for the offences of “endangering the life of others” and “voluntary abstention from fighting a disaster.”

Thousands of individuals, doctors and associations have filed complaints against members of the government for their role in the pandemic, which has killed more than 156,000 people in France and almost 2 million across Europe to date.

The CJR therefore opened an investigation in July 2020 into the two charges against Philippe. The investigation targets several ministers: Philippe, Buzyn, her successor as Health Minister, Olivier Véran, and the Philippe government’s spokesperson, Sibeth Ndiaye. As for French President Emmanuel Macron, whose responsibility in imposing the policy of ‘living with the virus’ is massive, he enjoys legal immunity as president.

The CJR ordered searches, which took place in October 2020, at the homes of Philippe, Véran, Buzyn and Ndiaye, Jérôme Salomon, the director general of health, and Geneviève Chêne, the director of Santé Publique France. Amongst the failures Philippe will be required to explain are:

- the drastic decrease in mask stocks before the pandemic;
- the failure to recommend wearing a mask at the beginning of the pandemic;

- the holding of municipal elections in March 2020;
- the failure to activate the Inter-ministerial Crisis Committee (CIC) in a timely manner;
- the failure to implement measures laid out in pre-existing pandemic plans.

Philippe delayed activating the CIC, even though he had signed a document less than a year earlier requiring the improvement of “government action in crisis management.” This document called for the ICC to be activated “sufficiently in advance, as soon as the extension of the crisis to several sectors is envisaged.” Despite alerts from China as early as December 2019 and the first cases in France in January 2020, the ICC was only activated on March 17, 2020, as France’s first confinement began.

The CJR’s incoherent decision to grant Philippe the status of assisted witness while indicting Buzyn raises the most serious questions about the CJR procedure. It suggests that the CJR is trying to divert focus to Buzyn in order to clear the main culprits, Philippe and Macron.

The lawyer for CoeurVie19, an association of COVID-19 victims, Me Yassine Bouzrou, said, “We do not understand this decision, because it is obvious that the actions of Ms Agnès Buzyn ... could not have been done without the agreement of the head of government.” The lawyer added: “I remind you the standards courts [in France], after complaints were filed, did absolutely nothing.”

Buzyn, who was indicted on September 10, 2021, has already faced around 20 hearings and is trying to defend herself in the press.

This week, *Le Monde* published an article, “COVID-19: Agnès Buzyn’s truths about the pandemic response,” which tries to rehabilitate Buzyn, based on documentation she has gathered to clear her name. Shocking reports are glossed over in a few words, like the fact that “For fear of leaks, she insists on delivering her concerns to him [Macron] in private, outside the council of ministers.” According to Médiapart, until she left the health ministry, Buzyn did not issue any alerts in the council of ministers.

Buzyn’s defence has no credibility. It presents her as a

medical personality who is apolitical and was not listened to enough. In reality, she was appointed by Macron to the Ministry of Health in May 2017 because of her many connections in the ruling class. She has held a range of positions in the health administration, before being appointed at the end of 2015, under Hollande, to the High Authority for Health.

Above all, however, Buzyn's inaction directly raises the responsibility of Macron and Philippe. Buzyn did nothing because she concluded, correctly, that they did not care about the health of the French people, especially insofar as its preservation threatened to reduce the flow of profits to the banks. She is now before the CJR not at the initiative of Macron or Philippe, but at the initiative of civil groups.

The CJR's investigation reveals that the official narrative on COVID-19 is a tissue of lies. Since the end of the first lockdown, the media and the ruling elite have denounced the public health measures taken to halt the first wave of the virus. The political establishment promotes a false narrative that the chief danger the pandemic poses is that scientists may seek to stop it and thus save lives.

Since the pandemic began, pseudo-left parties in France like Olivier Besancenot's New Anti-capitalist Party and Nathalie Arthaud's Workers' Struggle have joined their voices with those of the libertarians and the far right, hostile to any policy to eliminate the virus. A consensus in favor of "living with the virus," at the expense of mass death, dominates capitalist media and the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties.

The deadly policy was pursued in France and across the European Union, which is determined to minimize social spending and enrich the financial aristocracy at the expense of public health. During the first strict lockdown—imposed in France in March 2020 in response to a wave of strikes across Italy and Europe, and which almost eliminated the circulation of the virus—Macron gave only miserly aid to the masses. On the other hand, following the first confinement, he helped design a bailout package that gave trillions of euros to the banks.

The EU pursued this policy, which fueled inflation and enriched French and European billionaires, at the expense of millions of lives and the health of workers. Indeed, Macron made no effort to ensure that the low level of infections in May 2020 was followed by a serious attempt to trace contacts and eliminate the spread of the virus, as in China. The BMJ (formerly the British Medical Journal) cited the great Marxist Friedrich Engels to describe this policy as "social murder."

Now, the French justice system has confirmed that there is evidence in the official documentation that this policy was a state crime, according to its own standards.

This vindicates the WSWs, which has published thousands of articles on COVID-19, alerting the international working class to the disaster and advocating scientific policies to eliminate the virus. The WSWs and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) have explained that the pandemic is not just a medical crisis, but primarily a political one. Official inaction is a continuation of European austerity and war policies linked to a mortal crisis of global capitalism.

It is necessary therefore to issue the most serious warnings about the CJR investigation. The working class already has bitter experience that such investigations, carried out within the political framework of the capitalist state, end up clearing the main culprits.

Indeed, the CJR was created following the terrible health scandal of contaminated blood and the role of the big-business Socialist Party government of Mitterrand in the contamination of haemophiliacs in France by the AIDS virus in 1982-1985. Despite the convictions of health officials during the 1990s, the CJR cleared all PS politicians in 2003. The decision not to indict Philippe is the first step in a new attempt to cover up guilt at the highest levels of the state.

The working class must take matters into its own hands and lead its own struggle against Macron and COVID-19. Despite courageous actions against infection in workplaces and schools, many workers remain cut off from a scientific understanding of the virus. In order to educate the working class and counter the lies of the states and the media, the ICFI launched the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 pandemic on November 20, 2021.

The WSWs encourages workers and scientists to contribute to and participate in the Global Workers' Inquest in order to unmask the real perpetrators of the slaughter across the world.



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